Hobbies

U.S. offers designers cash prizes for dollars that ring true

By Roger Boye

Uncle Sam has launched a national coin-design contest—its first in nearly two decades—with $15,000 in cash prizes and a touch of immortality for the winners.

Announcement of the competition followed widespread criticism that two of the government's 1991 commemorative coins "look more like casualties than tributes."

Under U.S. Mint guidelines, anyone of any age can submit up to six designs for the three types of Olympic coins to be made next year, one drawing for each side of each coin. The winning artists will get $2,500 for each design selected and their initials will appear on the coin they helped to create.

Officials say they are seeking good-looking, highly marketable motifs symbolizing U.S. athletes in the 1992 Olympic games.

The 1991 Korean War commemorative dollar is "cluttered" to some.

Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady will make the final selections.

"Simplicity is desirable in all designs," according to mint guidelines. Hobby experts have used words such as "cluttered" and "trite" to describe designs of 1991 silver dollars honoring the United Service Organizations and the end of the Korean War.

Profits from the sale of 1992-dated commemorative coins will go to the U.S. Olympic Committee for the training of U.S. athletes, among other things. Hobby newspaper Coin World praised the mint's contest announcement, pointing out that exciting designs can be a major

factor in boosting coin sales.

The design competition "can be a win-win for collectors as well as for art and athletes," says Coin World.

Federal officials last ran a national coin-design contest in the 1970s for the "tails sides" of Bicentennial quarters, halves and dollar coins. Jack L. Ahr of Arlington Heights submitted the winning quarter design of a colonial drummer.

In a statement to Congress late last month, U.S. Mint Director Donna Pope said the government will use an open design competition for the 1992 Olympic coins because of the "considerable amount of lead time available." The Treasury was so rushed to make Korean War dollars that it considered designs only from its engraving staff (President Bush signed the Korean War Coin Act on Oct. 31, and coin production began on May 6).

Most other recent coin programs have used "limited design

competitions" open to mint engravers and a handful of private artists invited to participate.

Guidelines for the Olympic design contest are available from William F. Daddio (202-376-0592) or Brenda F. Gatling (202-376-0053) at the U.S. Mint. Officials must receive entries by June 10.

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It may be late 1991 before the U.S. Mint produces congressional gold medals honoring Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of Operation Desert Storm, and Gen. Colin L. Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

President Bush signed legislation last month authorizing the gold medals, with bronze duplicates to be sold to the public. The government will need a few months to complete medal designs and another three months to produce the medals.